

“Armored”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Ephesians 6:10-20

The idea of wearing the armor of God chafes just a little. We think of a huge suit of metal covering head to toe: heavy, cumbersome, restrictive, and for some of us, claustrophobic. And the defensive nature of armor can curb our enthusiasm. We like to take the initiative, not take shelter in a cocoon of steel.

Yet Paul knows how desperately we need the armor of God. “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The assaults we suffer in life, the fights we endure, involve cosmic forces far beyond our natural capacity to resist. We can only survive when we put on the sacred armor. Without it, we can’t stand up, and the slings and arrows of evil will wound and kill.

Without the belt of truth, we wallow in falsehood, unaware of reality, confused by others’ trickery, and sometimes dishonest even with ourselves. With the belt of truth, we can discern wisdom, grow to maturity in faith, and speak of God’s amazing love and peace to a world hungry for hope.

When we leave off the breastplate of righteousness, our hearts become vulnerable to sin. Temptation pierces our souls and leads us astray to aimless wandering and dead ends. We get lost, unable to find our way home. But when we strap righteousness onto our chest, we can choose what’s best for us and others, deflect sin, and stay in a healthy relationship with God and neighbor.

To strap on the shoes of peace keeps us grounded as ambassadors of reconciliation. They help us be better witnesses to the hope that forgiveness works. Walking barefoot in a world of enmity and strife, of grudges and vengeance, is like walking on broken glass. It brings us down, and keeps us down. We won't be able to stand for long if we don't put on the shoes of peace.

The shield of faith protects us. It stops the flaming arrows of evil and quenches them. We need not burn alive, consumed by fear and the hatred that fear stokes. But we have to pick the shield up and carry it high, and work it. We need to work our faith. Letting faith dangle complacently by our sides is useless. We have to lift it up and stay alert and push back against evil in all its forms. Push back against the evil that rejects God and seeks to burn all who follow Him.

On our heads we place the helmet of salvation, surrounding our minds with liberating grace. If we leave that off, we're going to get our brains beat in. Perhaps you've had a concussion. I have. People suffering from concussions can be forgetful. It can be hard to concentrate. We lose track of what's happening. We get confused. But clad in the helmet of salvation, we remember who we are and, more important, whose we are. We can focus on the unconditional love that sacrificed to free us from slavery to sin. We can be clear that the new life we've been given transcends all else.

Finally, we strap on the sword of God's word, the only offensive weapon in Paul's arsenal. There's something that feels a little unchristian about wielding a sword that slices and stabs and hacks. How does violence deliver the message about the mystery of God? The word is supposed to help, not hurt, but the word can sting. God's word cuts into pride and creates humility from the scar.

To “put on the whole armor of God” is the only way we can “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” Without it, we are weak, open to assault, bound to get injured, possibly killed. Without the armor that saves, we take ridiculous risks. It makes precisely zero sense to leave our armor in the closet, but we often do so anyway.

Strapping on the armor takes time, and we can be impatient. It takes help to put God’s armor on, and we can be reluctant to ask for help. Wearing sacred armor restricts our freedom of movement. We can’t just say or do whatever we want, but must submit ourselves to the God who made the armor and who gave it to us so that we can have the power to stand in truth and righteousness, peace and faith. We may not like this restriction, but the alternative is infinitely worse.

How many among us go out into the world stark naked? Don’t answer that question. There are things I really don’t need to know. But think about what it would be like to walk out of your house completely exposed. When we walk without the armor of God, for all intents and purposes, we are streaking spiritually. Apart from the embarrassment and impropriety, this leaves us vulnerable, defenseless, and unable to handle what comes our way. The epitome of foolishness is to move about without the freely offered gift of God’s armor.

Yet we do, more often than we’d like to admit, and the problem is real. Where do we summon the strength, the discipline, to put all this armor on, and keep it on? Prayer. That’s why Paul near the end of his Letter to the Ephesians asks them to “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” Even Paul, that great titan of the faith, author of one-quarter of the New Testament, needed prayer to carry on. But how does one pray?

There are many misconceptions. Some say that one must be on their knees, hands clasped together in a pious pose, or we need to be in the lotus position gazing at our navels.

Others insist that only the offices of the Prayer Book will do, or we need to speak with God in fancy glass language, offering what God wants to hear, rather than our own true selves, warts and all. Now these traditional ways of praying are good, and work for many people, but for some, these patterns seem like requirements, obligations that feel artificial, intrusive. Yes, one can pray in the ways that have been named with complete authenticity, but for many, these ways, helpful as they might be, ring hollow.

The truth about prayer is this. Prayer is nothing more and nothing less than an ongoing conversation with God, a relationship where we pour out our hearts without holding back and sit still for a time to listen for the voice of the Spirit. It's intimidating to some, this idea that somehow we can connect with God in an intimate, real way. After all, who are we to approach the throne of grace and dump our gunk? How unpleasant for God. How unseemly.

But this is exactly what God wants: honesty, raw as it may be; desire for help, as selfish as it may seem. God is like a parent with a kid in college, dying for that phone to ring, so that words of wisdom might flow through, so that our darkest pains might be healed by the light of love. God wants to give perspective when we're losing it. God wants to give us comfort when we've been beaten up. And we cannot begin to imagine the lengths God will go to. He's relentless, never gives up and never gives in. God will crucify His only Son and bring him back to life on the off chance that it will get our attention. That's formidable, and how lucky we are to worship such an intense, ruthless God.

When we pray, we can receive the truth without pretending that we have a monopoly on it. We can wear the breastplate of righteousness without becoming self-righteous, that gaudy garment so many Christians settle for. We can put on the shoes of peace, an unfashionable, out-of-date pair of sneakers that many sneer at. We can bear the shield of faith, unafraid and

unashamed. We can mess our hair up with the helmet of salvation. Nothing looks better to God than helmet-head. Why care what other people think?

And we can swing the sword. The word separates fact from fiction, gives us insight into how things are and how they're meant to be. Without the word, we remain on the defensive. With the word, we can take initiative and speak out and show the world that in the midst of fear and hatred, love reigns supreme.

Nobody ever said it was easy. Actually, some people do say that. Ignore them. Wearing the armor of God makes us let go. It takes us to places we might rather not be. It inspires us to do what's ridiculous in the sight of the world. How wonderful to be idiots in the eyes of those who embrace the folly of worldly power. How great it is to seem powerless and weak, when God makes us strong.

It takes a revolutionary to suit up in the armor of God and strap on the sword of God's word. It takes imagination that what is now shall not be forever. It takes an adventurer unafraid to wield enormous power, a terrible responsibility, for the sake of the world. It takes people like us, weird people, people of faith in the promise that the armor won't fade or fail, but will see us through. Amen.